

### Background

Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS) is a telephone service that allows persons with hearing or speech disabilities to place and receive telephone calls. TRS is available in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. territories for local and/or long distance calls. TRS providers – generally telephone companies – are compensated for the costs of providing TRS from either a state or a federal fund. There is no cost to the TRS user.

#### How Does TRS Work?

TRS uses operators, called communications assistants (CAs), to facilitate telephone calls between people with hearing and speech disabilities and other individuals. A TRS call may be initiated by either a person with a hearing or speech disability, or a person without such disability, with the CA serving as the link for the call.

#### What Forms of TRS Are Available?

There are several forms of TRS, depending on the particular needs of the user and the equipment available.

**Text-to-Voice TTY-based TRS** – With this type of “traditional” TRS, a person with a hearing or speech disability uses a special text telephone, called a TTY, to call the CA at the relay center. TTYs have a keyboard and allow people to type their telephone conversations. The text is read on a display screen and/or a paper printout. A TTY user calls a TRS relay center and types the number of the person he or she wishes to call. The CA at the relay center then makes a voice telephone call to the other party to the call, and relays the call back and forth between the parties by speaking what a text user types, and typing what a voice telephone user speaks.

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#### What Forms of TRS Are Available? (cont'd.)

**Voice Carry Over** - Voice Carry Over (VCO) is a type of TTY-based TRS that allows a person with a hearing disability, but who wants to use his or her own voice, to speak directly to the called party and receive responses in text from the CA. No typing is required by the calling party. This service is particularly useful to senior citizens who have lost their hearing, but who can still speak.

**Hearing Carry Over** - Hearing Carry Over (HCO) is a type of TTY-based TRS that allows a person with a speech disability, but who wants to use his/her own hearing, to listen to the called party and type his/her part of the conversation on a TTY. The CA reads these words to the called party, and the caller hears responses directly from the called party.

**Speech-to-Speech (STS) Relay** - This form of TRS is used by a person with a speech disability. A CA, who is specially trained in understanding a variety of speech disorders, repeats what the caller says in a manner that makes the caller's words clear and understandable to the called party. No special telephone is needed. For more information regarding STS visit <http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/speechto speech.html>.

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## What Forms of TRS Are Available? (cont'd.)

### **Shared Non-English Language Relay Services**

- Due to the large number of Spanish speakers in the United States, the FCC requires interstate TRS providers to offer Spanish-to-Spanish traditional TRS. Although Spanish language relay is not required for intrastate (within a state) TRS, many states with large numbers of Spanish speakers offer this service on a voluntary basis. The FCC also allows TRS providers who voluntarily offer other shared non-English language interstate TRS, such as French-to-French, to be compensated from the federal TRS fund.

**Captioned Telephone Service** - Captioned telephone service, like VCO, is used by persons with a hearing disability but some residual hearing. It uses a special telephone that has a text screen to display captions of what the other party to the conversation is saying. A captioned telephone allows the user, on one line, to speak to the called party and to simultaneously listen to the other party and read captions of what the other party is saying. There is a "two-line" version of captioned telephone service that offers additional features, such as call-waiting, \*69, call forwarding, and direct dialing for 911 emergency service. Unlike traditional TRS (where the CA types what the called party says), the CA repeats or re-voices what the called party says. Speech recognition technology automatically transcribes the CA's voice into text, which is then transmitted directly to the user's captioned telephone text display.

**Video Relay Service (VRS)** - This Internet-based form of TRS allows persons whose primary language is American Sign Language (ASL) to communicate with the CA in ASL using video conferencing equipment. The CA speaks what is signed to the called party, and signs the called party's response back to the caller. VRS is not required by the FCC, but is offered by several TRS providers. VRS allows conversations to flow in near real time and in a faster and more natural manner than text-based TRS. Beginning January 1, 2006, TRS providers

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## What Forms of TRS Are Available? (cont'd.)

that offer VRS must provide it 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and must answer incoming calls with a specific period of time so that VRS users do not have to wait for a long time. For more information regarding VRS visit

<http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/videorelay.html>

**IP Relay** – IP Relay is a text-based form of TRS that uses the Internet, rather than traditional telephone lines, for the leg of the call between the person with a hearing or speech disability and the CA. Otherwise, the call is generally handled just like a TTY-based TRS call. The user may use a computer or other web-enabled device to communicate with the CA. IP Relay is not required by the FCC, but is offered by several TRS providers. For more information regarding IP Relay visit

<http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/iprelay.html>.

## 711 Access to TRS

Just as you can call 411 for information, you can dial 711 to connect to certain forms of TRS anywhere in the United States. Dialing 711 makes it easier for travelers to use TRS because they do not have to remember TRS numbers in every state. Because of technological limitations, however, 711 access is not available for the Internet-based forms of TRS (VRS and IP Relay). For more information regarding 711 visit <http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/711.html>.

## Mandatory Minimum Standards for TRS

TRS providers must offer service that meets certain mandatory minimum standards set by the FCC. These include:

- The CA answering or placing a TRS call must stay with the call for a minimum of 10 minutes to avoid disruptions to the TRS user (15 minutes for STS calls).

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## Mandatory Minimum Standards for TRS (cont'd.)

- Most forms of TRS must be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
- TRS providers must answer 85 percent of all calls within 10 seconds (but there are different answer speed rules for VRS).
- CAs are prohibited from intentionally altering or disclosing the content of a relayed conversation and generally must relay all conversation verbatim unless the user specifically requests summarization.
- TRS providers must ensure user confidentiality and CAs (with a limited exception for STS) may not keep records of the contents of any conversation.
- The conversation must be relayed in real time.
- CAs must provide a minimum typing speed for text-based calls and VRS CAs must be qualified interpreters.
- For most forms of TRS, the provider must be able to handle emergency (911) calls and relay them to the appropriate emergency services.

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## Don't Hang Up!

Some people hang up on TRS calls because they think the CA is a telemarketer. If you hear, "Hello. This is the relay service..." when you pick up the phone, please don't hang up! You are about to talk, through a TRS provider, to a person who is deaf, hard-of-hearing, or has a speech disability.

### For More Information

For more information on TRS, or other telecommunications-related issues, contact the FCC's Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau in the following ways:

Internet at [www.fcc.gov/cgb](http://www.fcc.gov/cgb)

Consumer Center:

1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322) voice

1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322) TTY

Mail:

Federal Communications Commission  
Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau  
445 12<sup>th</sup> Street, SW  
Washington, DC 20554.

If you have questions, or would like to receive free information about disability issues on a regular basis via e-mail, contact the FCC's Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau at [fccinfo@fcc.gov](mailto:fccinfo@fcc.gov).

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*To receive information on this and other FCC consumer topics through the Commission's electronic subscriber service, click on <http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/contacts>.*

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